

# Critical Friendships Among Beginning Philosophers<sup>1</sup>

***Research report on a mini-project funded by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy***

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‘The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one.’

– Epicurus

***Abstract:*** *In a mini-project funded by the Subject Centre, we reviewed the educational literature on peer support and used focus groups to explore students’ ideas of academic and critical friendship. We report on our findings, make some connections with philosophical writing on friendship, and offer some steps that institutions might take to foster academically fecund friendships among philosophy students.*

## **Background and Rationale**

Students often do not realise that their best resource is each other. Or if they do, they are unsure how to help each other without falling into academic misconduct.

Students usually arrive at university with habits formed at school, knowing that they will have to ‘work more independently’. All too often, they imagine that this means working in isolation, and the sparse timetable of classes universities typically offer them confirms this misapprehension.<sup>2</sup> Our prior research<sup>3</sup> indicates that a low ratio of classroom time to private study makes it difficult for students to form supportive intellectual friendships with other students on their courses. Many do not realise that

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<sup>2</sup> One of the student voices in Longden & Yorke regretted not having made ‘sure I was really organised and prepared as it is mainly singular study. Having come straight from achieving higher A levels in sixth form, this has been a shock. Sometimes brutal.’ (p. 42) Another complained of ‘Lots of time between sessions wasted’ (*ibid.*), apparently unaware that such time could be spent in discussion with other students.

<sup>3</sup> See Larvor & Lippitt (2009). This project was funded through the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies.

'independent study' means intellectual autonomy rather than cognitive autarky. It is rarely explained to them that a group of students can work autonomously on a shared project (if they devise or select their own methods and do their own research), or that working alone on a pre-structured (and therefore tutor-dependent) task may not constitute independent study. Since first-year undergraduates have little direct contact with research activity, they may not notice spontaneously that philosophy is collaborative. Researchers in philosophy form reading groups, listen to and criticise each other's papers in seminars, read each other's drafts, give each other *ad hoc* tutorials and suggest sources. For most academics, becoming an independent researcher crucially involves developing and sustaining a network of scholars with similar or related interests—and gaining the skills and virtues necessary to sustain such relationships. This collaboration is almost entirely hidden from readers of the books and articles it produces. In the humanities, most research-products are single-author documents. We acknowledge help from others in small-print, in a preface or at the foot of a page, where few first-year students are likely to notice it.

Instead of explaining and exemplifying the collaborative nature of philosophy, we greet new students with warnings about plagiarism and collusion. This, together with the easily misunderstood instruction to 'work independently', confirms to them that university must be a solitary struggle. 'How to study' guides usually corroborate this impression. Even the otherwise excellent *Doing Philosophy* mentions interaction with other students just twice (Lamb *et al*, 2007: 93-4 and 159-60). Both these brief discussions suppose that 'study-buddy' relationships are already in place, and offer no advice on how to initiate or sustain them. Thus, practical and cultural factors conspire to discourage students from forming useful, supportive intellectual peer-friendships at just the moment (the transition to university) when contact time with tutors abruptly diminishes.

The consequences are familiar to every personal tutor. Students struggling in isolation, suddenly deprived of the teacher-support they had in school or college, turn in sub-standard work. Their sense of how well other students are doing may depend excessively on the impressive talk of the confident few who dominate seminars and they may feel intimidated by imagining the wonderful essays such students must write. Their confidence drains away and their studies become purgatorial. This can happen to students at any point on the ability range.

Telling students that co-operation is normal may help. However, exhortation alone rarely solves deep-seated problems with their roots in years of school experience. We need to develop effective ways of promoting intellectual friendships among students and teaching them how to help each other without cheating.

## **The project**

Philosophy has a rich tradition of writing on friendship in such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, Bacon, Montaigne, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Emerson and Derrida,<sup>4</sup> to say nothing of contemporary treatments of the topic.<sup>5</sup> Outside philosophy, there is a burgeoning educational literature on learning communities, peer support, peer tutoring and critical friendship. The first phase

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<sup>4</sup> Two good anthologies are Pakaluk (ed.), 1991 and Badhwar (ed.), 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Lynch, 2005 and Vernon, 2005.

of this project surveys and reports on this research insofar as it bears on the typical assessment instruments and aims of undergraduate philosophy education.

The second phase explores the target audience, namely, beginning philosophy students. Ideally, one would like to solve this problem at school level rather than at university. Or if we cannot intervene at school, we should begin on day one of their time at university (that is, a moment when their understanding is still essentially that of school students). An effective intervention requires knowledge of the present perceptions of the target population. Consequently, we formed two focus groups among year 12 and 13 students in two institutions (Peter Symonds College, Winchester and Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden). We used semi-structured discussion to explore their understanding of friendship, co-operation and collusion. We regard these groups as a source of representative student voices, rather than as an attempt to identify statistically normal student opinion.

The third phase notes the connections between these results and some important philosophical writing on friendship.

## **I: Learning Communities and Peer Support—a critical review of the educational literature**

### **Introduction: what do we mean by ‘peer support’?**

Peer support has been used in British education to involve students in each others’ academic and social development since at least the 1950s (Topping, 1988). Peer tutoring first appeared in the primary classroom, where children were used as ‘agents of change’ for improving the behaviour and attainment of peers. In practice, this would mean the establishment of ‘reading pairs’ and teachers encouraging more able pupils to assist others with classroom work. However, it was only in the 1980s in the UK, with the publication of the first major work on the subject (Goodlad, 1978), that peer tutoring became more widely used in schools and universities.

Peer tutoring first appeared in higher education in the 1990s and it has been used within a range of academic disciplines since (Tariq, 2005). It claims to offer three benefits: (1) improving cost-effectiveness (2) reducing non-completion rates and (3) improving study and learning skills. The following section will discuss these points in turn.

### **Peer Support in Higher Education**

The development in British universities over the last twenty years of Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS) reflects the need to assist students without further stretching human and/or financial resources. This form of student-to-student intervention owes much to the North American Supplemental Instruction (SI) model, which at its core, emphasises ‘preparing students to learn and empowering them to become autonomous in their learning’ (Martin and Arendale, 1993). SI emphasises *cooperation* rather than competition. It uses informal review sessions in which students compare notes, read, discuss and develop organisational tools for learning. Sessions are often facilitated by older students with experience of the course. SI is now an internationally recognised academic support and retention programme (Wallace, 1996).

A review of the literature reveals that peer support, and being receptive to it, is strongly correlated with academic engagement. Kingston (2008) explored the ‘affective characteristics’ of students who participated in courses that experienced high numbers of students dropping out. She concluded that

students on these courses were more likely to have high self-esteem and good levels of interpersonal skills (than students on 'low drop-out' courses), but *less likely to trust their peers as sources of support*. On courses with low drop-out rates, the opposite was true; students exhibited a high level of confidence in their peers as sources of social support and exhibited a more proactive attitude to self-improvement.

In 2003, there were 35 PAL schemes within UK Higher Education. Sixty-one percent of these were initiated for 'retention purposes' as well as widening participation (Phillips, 2006). As is often the case, a programme that might benefit all students is introduced to support students who are judged to have particular needs or vulnerabilities. Carefully organised induction programmes focusing on building social support networks for new entrants, now form part of a widely used student retention strategy across UK universities. What follow are a few selected examples of these schemes at work.

In *Goldsmiths, University of London*, a PAL scheme exists to help first year students make the transition into higher education by 'creating a supportive environment'. Second and third year students are recruited and trained as mentors to run peer-assisted learning groups for first years.

A similar scheme operates in *Bournemouth University*, which adopted a personal tutoring system in 2002. The aim of the programme is 'to enhance the first year experience' within departments 'at risk' of student drop-out. Second-year students are now paired with those in the first year, and mentoring time designed into student timetables to facilitate learning and ease new arrivals into university life (Hartwell and Farbrother, 2006).

At the *University of Ulster*, where peer tutoring schemes have been in existence since 2002, there have been noticeable improvements in retention rates at the university in courses where peer-support strategies have been implemented. Students perceive peer support as being of real benefit to them. They have reported a greater ability to retain knowledge as well as, 'enhanced creativity, greater use of library material, resourcefulness and increased motivation' (Houston and Lazenbatt, 1996).

The *University of Manchester* has established two major peer support programmes: 'peer mentoring' and 'peer assisted study sessions' (PASS). PASS provide additional opportunities for all students to interact with their peers in collaborative study groups within their own disciplines. The sessions are attached to a unit within a degree course and provide 'a safe environment for students to discuss ideas, share problems and resolve questions in a setting that supplements the core curriculum' (Ody and Carey, 2008).

The 'peer mentoring programme' at Manchester is less about academic achievement and more about providing a social support network for students. It fosters a sense of community through 'informal activity enabling interaction across the various student cohorts within a discipline'. Sessions are informal and can be attached to tutorial groups or run independently. In 2008, the university operated a peer mentoring scheme with over 1100 students acting as peer mentors across 39 disciplines (Ody and Carey, 2008).

Often, participants in PALS experience corollary benefits apart from improved study skills. *Sheffield Hallam University*, for example, has been running a peer support project for Chinese students on a pre-masters course in recent years, integrating them with students on an international business programme that involves a placement in China. The scheme was developed by staff mainly to improve the study methods of Chinese students. However, there have been many other reported positive effects for student participants, such as gaining an understanding of a different culture, and

conventions, etiquette, daily life, making friends to have regular contact with, and overcoming shyness.

Fostering a sense of belonging and helping establish friendship groups for students is now a recognised strategy for increasing the enjoyment of the social and academic aspects of university life, and ultimately, as we discuss in more detail below, improving learning and critical thinking skills.

### **The Positive Impact of Peers on Learning**

Programmes that focus on helping new students adapt and succeed in the first year of university are only one variant of many models of peer tutoring that have appeared in higher education. Other models include: (1) student ‘discussion’ groups, (2) seminars led by postgraduate or more advanced students, (3) learning cells or what are termed ‘enhanced pairs’: a form of learning in pairs in which students alternate in asking questions, (4) collaborative peer learning (a form of learning which occurs through social interaction between peers and is directed towards the accomplishment of a task or problem solving exercise), (5) ‘cascading’ which involves teaming up with one peer and then discussing with others subsequently, (6) ‘parrainage’ (a buddy system) and (7) self and peer assessment (Houston and Lazenbatt, 1996).

At the heart of the models listed above is the thought that the most effective learning environment is one where learning is a social activity, ‘fully involving the learner, preferably...in a supportive and non-threatening environment’ (Wallace, 1996: 110). Social isolation is not conducive to academic achievement; we know that learning together in a collaborative and experiential way can significantly increase an individual’s learning potential (*ibid*: 112). The peer group can discourage intellectual interest and growth or conversely invigorate a person’s desire to learn (Schaffer and Griggs, 1990: 2). This is particularly the case for young people, where the peers are highly influential (Antonio, 1994; Wentzel and Watkins, 2002).

The emergence of the ‘personalised learning’ model in schools and universities in the UK in recent years gives extra emphasis to the value that peers can bring to learning. This approach emphasises one-to-one tuition, mentoring, peer coaching, smaller tuition groups, online support and discussion, in order to ‘encourage students to be intellectually curious, learn independently and self-evaluate’ (Shepherd, 2006). It is based on the idea that learning is an ‘active process of constructing knowledge’ (Hewitt, 2008: 35) and less about performing actions in line with teachers’ instructions.

### **Critical Friendship**

Peer scrutiny has proved a useful learning tool for practitioners across a wide variety of settings. For example, it has been recognised that peer coaching can enhance performance and improve practice in business (Ladyshevsky, 2006), the medical profession (Baguley and Brown, 2009; Kammer, 1982; Schaffer and Griggs, 1990; Roberts, 2009) and teaching (Cornu, 1995; Bambino, 2002; Dunne and Honts, 1998). ‘Peer coaching’ is a term that is often used interchangeably within the literature on peer support. It is not entirely synonymous with, but does contain many aspects linked to the idea of ‘critical friendship’.

Collectively, the studies above reveal how scrutiny, under the guise of ‘critical friendship’, can significantly develop and enrich professional standards, mainly through the development of reflective practice. The literature contains many interpretations of ‘critical friendship’ but central to most definitions is the acknowledgement that a critical friend is ‘a ‘confidant’ who acts as a ‘sounding board’, providing guidance and support (Baird, 1993). This model of critical friendship involves individuals assisting each other through ‘questioning, reflecting back and providing another

viewpoint'. It is a process that should prompt 'honest reflection and appraisal' (Swaffield, 2008), and although it can be an uncomfortable experience to have one's practice scrutinised, it is ultimately one that participants find useful.

Being a critical friend may require qualities more like those of a teacher than of a student. That may be why Briggs' *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* offers a very short note on student learning partners (p. 112), but a longer discussion of critical friendship (pp. 154-5) in the chapter on 'The Reflective Teacher'. These two discussions assume that such relationships require no special virtues or nurturing beyond those found in any other kind of friendship.

Beyond Briggs, there are many references in the educational literature to the role that critical friendship can play in the development of professional practice. Of particular note are 'critical friends groups' (CFGs) or 'critical friendship communities' for teachers. Such groups usually entail participants observing each other during lessons and providing support, companionship, feedback and assistance (Ackland, 1991; Wynn and Kromrey, 1999). They offer a 'space' where individuals can challenge each other in a climate of mutual vulnerability and risk-taking (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997), absorb multiple perspectives, explore practice, try and test out new pedagogical methods and develop a professional 'voice' (Cropley, 2001; Kohler *et al*, 1999). Such groups reflect a growing trend for site-based professional development in which educational practitioners behave as 'managers of their own learning' (Franzak, 2002). The type of peer coaching typically contained within CFGs, is known as 'reciprocal coaching' as it does not regard one of the parties as an 'expert', but rather an equal partner (Showers, 1985: 47).

Critical friendship has also been used to develop leadership qualities among teaching staff and improve schools' performance (Swaffield, 2008). This study explored the attributes of critical friendship in school learning communities. Swaffield usefully lists the key ingredients crucial to critical friendship in this context as: trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, constructive critique and advocacy. She describes 'dialogue' as being 'at the heart of critical friendship' and learning (Swaffield, 2008: 334).

Studies equally reveal the positive contribution that CFGs can make towards developing a culture of learning for *students* (Waghid, 2006; Van Swet *et al*, 2009). This latter study, for example, highlighted the value of critical friendship for postgraduate students doing research and writing their dissertations within an international master's course. A key line of enquiry that formed the basis of this study was exploring how the process of becoming critical friends can be actively promoted by those running the course. The course consisted of lectures, workshop, roundtables, working as critical friends, individual and group presentations, tutorials and self-study. It was considered that in order to become more competent practitioners (in their chosen area of special needs education), students should be encouraged to be a 'critical friend' to their peers.

This study shed light on how best to implement a successful critical friendship strategy among higher education students. To achieve participant buy-in, studies emphasise the importance of discussing the concept of critical friendship with students beforehand (taking into consideration as far as possible life histories, cultural background and focusing on issues of trust and critical debate). They also underline the importance of defining roles and tasks as clearly as possible before starting the process. Other vital features are as follows. Firstly, critical friends must be happy to engage in open and honest communication. Secondly, they must be able and expected to ask uncomfortable questions and present critiques that may be challenging. Thirdly, the recipient needs to be able to receive feedback non-defensively, be open to alternative perspectives, and feel 'safe' in 'thinking aloud'. According to

Franzak, a feeling of safety within a CFG stems from three factors: (1) a sense of equality, (2) the group's positive attitude and (3) the purposefulness of the work (Franzak, 2002: 226).

A common issue affecting critical friendship is an initial reticence about exposing one's work to peers. This reluctance, studies show, may be reduced by participants being able to choose their own critical friend in the initial stages (Van Swet *et al*, 2008).

Diversity among students was seen across studies on critical friendship, as a rich source of intellectual growth, indeed the 'multi-cultural characteristics' of CFGs in the Van Smet study appeared to 'aid students in the process of seeing other perspectives and viewpoints'. CFGs ran more smoothly when 'small' in size because then discussing each other's work does not take too long. Finally, the literature warns that developing CFGs may take time, as participants (perhaps for the first time) learn to talk, share their work and think in a collaborative way. Of course, both aspects of critical friendship (learning to give and receive criticism and becoming friends) take time.

These studies and other literature on critical friendship illuminate a number of barriers to critical friendship. The most common issue concerns the 'uneasy marriage' (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997) between the norms of friendship with those of critique.

The practice of criticising friends' work can cause tension and discomfort. This is common amongst, but not confined to, students, who can be particularly reluctant to evaluate peers and provide an assessment of their work (Falchikov, 2001: 2). For many, 'critical friendship' contains an obvious tension. As Handal (2008) observes, 'criticism [is] usually conveyed by someone who represents contrasting or alternative points of view or other interests and who may even be hostile to us'. However, as he notes, a 'real friend' is someone 'on whom we can rely and who will even hold a critical mirror before us when necessary'. The theme of trust arose spontaneously in the focus groups (section II) and we return to it in section III below.

In a study of critical friendship practices among trainee teachers, a number of practical tensions were identified relating to individuals' reluctance to criticise peers. Participants would often leave problematic assumptions unchallenged, limiting their feedback to 'safe' feedback and recipients would often resist hearing criticism (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997). Critical friendship requires individuals to develop diplomatic and constructive ways of communicating feedback to others.

Barriers to collaboration in the context of critical friendship may include defensiveness, differences in communication styles and cultural norms (Cropley, 2001: 165). Other barriers may be more practical, such as unavailable space within institutions or inappropriate available space (see Klein, 1999). As Klein notes, learning through collaboration and critical inquiry necessitates both a physical 'thinking space' conducive to talking, sharing and listening and a 'thinking environment' (a set of conditions under which people think for themselves and think well together). A 'thinking environment' necessitates equality, appreciation, limiting assumptions, respect, ease (the space that a thinking environment needs to stay intact), encouragement, diversity, incisive questions, attention and information.

According to Klein, competition in a thinking environment is particularly hazardous (Klein, 1999: 72). In order for a person to think well, they have to be encouraged by the listener 'without smelling a bead of envy or competition from them'. Competition may mean one participant steering the other away from a great idea by suggesting they concentrate somewhere else. Conversely, if the person thinking is competing with you, trying to seem more clever or competitive, they will not be able to pursue their own ideas honestly or fully. Competitive listeners are thinking inhibitors (*ibid*).

Handal (2008) argues that it is our attitude towards criticism that requires challenge. He claims that it should be seen as an 'academic virtue' rather than something to fear, resist or avoid. He notes that a critical approach is already a highly valued tool for assessing the quality of ideas and outcome within academia, so there is no reason why this cannot be the case in other areas. Indeed, as he sees it, 'critical appreciation is a central element of academic identity' (*ibid*: 66). Handal defines 'good criticism' as 'generally relevant, argumentative, well-documented and something we learn from'. Among academic philosophers, Handal's definition is platitudinous (though perhaps honoured in the breach more often than we would care to admit). The fact that he troubled to make these remarks at all is a useful reminder that these apparent platitudes about the value of criticism are part of a professional identity that incoming students, and their schoolteachers, do not necessarily share. Much of the literature insists on the desirability of a safe environment (Ody and Carey 2008, Wallace 1996), without always noting the tension between this and the 'mutual vulnerability and risk-taking' to which Achinstein and Meyer allude.

Although we have been exploring the value of 'critical' friendship above, the literature also confirms that friendship *per se* can have a powerful effect on learning; it does not necessarily require a critical component. Eraut (2000 as cited in Roberts, 2009: 368) defines 'informal learning' as 'any kind of learning which does not take place within, or follow from, a formally organised learning programme'. The control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner; it is unstructured and does not take place in a classroom (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

Roberts' (2009) ethnographic study of student nurses in clinical practice sheds light on how 'informal learning' can be a powerful bi-product of friendship. His study reveals three key themes relating to friendships and peer learning. Firstly, that student nurses develop an 'ask anything' culture amongst their peer group, and see each other as valuable sources of information. Secondly, they see each other as a discrete group, who are 'in the same boat' and develop their own community to 'to help each other out'. Thirdly, knowledge is not linked necessarily to seniority. Within clinical practice, student nurses in this study collaborated in order to learn, constructing their knowledge informally, through shared experience and practice. Friendship provided the medium through which 'vicarious learning' took place (*ibid*: 371).

Peers are clearly a rich resource for enhancing the learning process whether or not their role involves any formalised means for providing critique and feedback. This fact has led some commentators to argue that educators need to find a way of capitalising on informal learning opportunities, helping learners to make their vicarious learning 'more visible and rigorous' (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

### **Why does peer coaching lead to improved learning?**

It has been claimed that peer learning promotes (among other things): working with others, critical enquiry and reflection, communication and articulation of knowledge, understanding and ideas, managing learning and how to learn, self and peer assessment (Boud et al, 2001). But how?

Constructivist educational theorists influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky underline the importance of conceptual conflict as a means of provoking individual reflection and ultimately improved conceptions (Andersen, 2001). Ladyshewsky (2008) explains how 'critical cognitive conflicts' as Piaget called them, provoke new ideas and refine thinking and problem solving skills:

When a learner... through discussions with another peer becomes aware of a contradiction in his/her knowledge base, the learner experiences a lapse of



equilibrium. The learner will initiate strategies to restore equilibrium, for example, by engaging the peer in working together to find a solution that both can accept.

This view is echoed by Andersen (2001), who notes that ‘social interaction offers a natural corrective to the egocentrism of individual thought: we try out our ideas, and often our interlocutor is better able than we are to evaluate and offer a critique of them perhaps even offering a contrasting view’.

Peer coaching and collaboration encourages individual development through a process of purposeful enquiry based on reflection and action, leading to ‘enhanced meta-cognition’. Baird (1993: 46) claims that meta-cognition encompasses three components:

- *meta-cognitive knowledge* (knowledge about the nature and process of learning, personal learning style, productive learning strategies),
- *awareness of the current learning task* (generated by the learner asking appropriate evaluative questions such as ‘What am I doing?’ ‘Why am I doing it?’ and then instituting procedures to find out the answers).
- *control of the current learning task* (by having learners make more purposeful, productive decisions, based on their increased level of awareness).

Boud (1995) claims that meta-cognitive learning has been shown to lead to a deeper and more lasting learning. Below are some examples where meta-cognitive learning has taken place within a number of peer support learning models in higher education.

First, ‘small group teaching’ (SGT) is particularly conducive to improved meta-cognition. The main publication on this teaching method states that ‘SGT is all about helping students learn with and from each other through the promotion of ‘active interpersonal communication’ (Exley and Dennick, 2004). It commonly occurs in ‘student-led SGTs’, which can mean 4-8 students developing a ‘learning set’ or ‘tutor-less’ tutorials which support a constructivist approach to learning.

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning; the SGT simply facilitates discussion. SGT often includes peer tutoring, self and peer monitoring, where ‘participating students are called to think beyond what they have been given or taught’ (Exley and Dennick, 2004). This requires a degree of collaboration and free exchange not commonly found in other forms of teaching. SGT or peer learning in pairs for example, is much more effective for transmitting information and for achieving higher level conceptual skills (Cropley, 2001:168).

Within the literature on what is termed ‘action learning’, the positive benefits to students of working with other course participants (normally in small groups) are well documented. Studies talk of the camaraderie that can develop within a ‘*learning set*’. These personal ‘think tanks’ are places of mutual support, a safe place to explore project and self, a place where friendships are formed; a place to be challenged; a place to get feedback which is both positive and negative (Bourner and Frost, 1996).

Second, Ladyshevsky (2006) describes peer coaching meetings intended to provide students with a safe place to discuss learning objectives and questions stemming from their real-life project assignments. Peer coaches each received a one-hour orientation on peer coaching and its relationship to management education and professional development. Students also received a guide to peer coaching. The duration of the peer coaching relationship had a set time of twelve weeks. To receive credit for peer coaching, all students were required to submit peer coaching reports that described their experience (based around set questions). The report along with the students’ learning objectives

and an excerpt from their learning journal was worth twenty per cent of their overall grade for the unit. The peer coaching reports showed the enhancement of critical thinking and the heightening of meta-cognition. In other words, the students understood their own thinking better, were able to take control of it and do it better.

To summarise: there is an overwhelming consensus in the educational literature that student-to-student coaching and critical friendship deepen learning. They are particularly helpful in developing intellectual independence, especially when the participants are members of the same class or cohort. On the other hand, the authors surveyed differ in the relative emphasis they place on the safety of the thinking environment and the risks associated with genuine criticism.

## **II: Students in years 12/13 discuss academic friendship**

**Method:** Against the background of this literature, we conducted two focus groups, one of eight students at Peter Symonds College (a sixth-form college in Winchester with over 3000 students) and, one of ten students at Sir John Lawes School (an all-ability co-educational LEA-maintained secondary school in Harpenden with an annual year-seven intake of about 180). Each group discussion took just over an hour. We presented the questions on PowerPoint slides but we allowed the discussion to range freely. We first asked the students, 'What sort of activities help you to understand a new topic?' and 'What resources are there at school or college to help you learn?' This was to test whether they spontaneously identified their working with their peers as an aid to learning. We then presented them with this quotation from a student nurse:

When you begin university, you are told about all the support available to you, but the most important support network is never mentioned; fellow students. No one can empathise with you like another student can.

(Roberts 2009: 369)

With the topic thus introduced, we invited the students to 'Contrast the friend who helps you with your academic work and an ordinary pal. What *extra* skills, knowledge, values and virtues does the former need to have?'

Next, we specified 'academic' friendship as 'critical' friendship, explained that this idea has practical application among teachers from trainees up to headteachers<sup>6</sup>, and asked the students:

- What do you make of this idea?
- What problems do you see with it?
- How might these problems be solved?

We also wanted to explore the idea, mentioned in section I, that resistance to critical friendship might be minimised by allowing participants to choose their own critical friend in the early stages. This runs into a potential objection: the idea, very common in discussions of friendship amongst the ancients, that the true friend is the very opposite of the flatterer. We asked the students to discuss whether flattery has any place in friendship generally and academic friendship in particular.

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion in section I (above).

We then asked the students whether they wanted to revise or augment their answers on the contrast between ordinary and academic friendships. To keep the peer-to-peer aspect in view, we asked the participants whether reciprocity is an essential element in academic friendships. Here we were interested in students' views as to whether a one-sided academic friendship could possibly work: cf. Franzak's point above about the importance of equality in critical friendships. Compare here too Emerson's claim that 'the only way to have a friend is to be one' (Emerson in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 230).

Our prior research identified anxieties about plagiarism and collusion as barriers to informal peer-support, so we asked:

- How can students help each other to study without cheating?
- How can students help each other with essay-writing without cheating?

Our enquiry is motivated by a search for effective interventions, so we asked 'What conditions or activities would be conducive to forming and maintaining academic friendships?' and 'Could social networking sites make a difference to academic friendships? If so, how?'

The target for this research is the assumptions that students bring to university with them, so we asked, 'Do you think your answers to all these questions might be different at university? If so, how?'

Finally, we asked the students how many contact hours per week they expected to have at university.

## **Results**

In answer to the first question, no students identified each other as a resource. Invited to explain why, they said that their peers wouldn't be able to help them as they lack topic-knowledge. There were anxieties about the reliability of information gained from non-teachers. Most seemed to assume that 'help' must mean explaining curriculum content. Called on to elaborate, some participants observed that new students won't have any more idea than themselves how to write essays. More advanced students are more useful, because they may have worked out study techniques. One participant did eventually say, 'The best way to learn something is by teaching it yourself.'

Asking help from a teacher is easy because teachers are there to help, but asking a student for help is awkward as that person may not want to teach. Also, the participants reported pressure not to reveal struggles and weaknesses: you do not want to admit that you are falling behind. This suggests that going to another student for help is seen as an exceptional, remedial event rather than a normal part of learning (which connects with a common feature of many of the programmes reviewed in section I). Furthermore, they observed that fellow students can be competitors. Some felt deeply anxious that their ideas might be stolen, even though A-level marking is on an absolute scale: one student's mark is not affected if another benefits from a borrowed or stolen thought. One lamented that essays are not covered by copyright.

In response to the question about the skills, knowledge, values and virtues required of the friend who helps with academic work, participants said that maturity is more important than intelligence. By 'maturity' they seemed to mean discipline and focus. One said it was more about the person's work ethic; another said that an ordinary friend with a good work ethic is better than someone who is

merely knowledgeable. The academic friend would have to take the academic side seriously: the relationship cannot 'just be based on hanging out'. (Here and elsewhere there was a tacit admission that time set aside for study is too easily and too often spent messing about.) There was some ambiguity about whether the academic friend is also a regular friend, or merely a utility-relationship. One participant suggested that you wouldn't choose someone who wasn't already a friend. Participants eventually assembled a demanding list of qualities that an academic friend should have. An academic friend should be 'blunt but polite with it'; be truthful; have some knowledge about you as a person; have 'good morals'; 'do what's morally right for you' and have the same values as you but different (complementary) skills and knowledge. Your academic friend should challenge you and 'take you out of your comfort zone'.

There was a spontaneous suggestion that reciprocity is a good thing in such friendships. Your academic friend need not be someone 'cleverer' than you because you could 'work things out together'. It is noteworthy that the idea of intellectual near-equals working things out together is what the researchers understand by academic friendship, but this picture emerged only late and fleetingly in the participants' contributions. One participant opined that while it's nicer and better for a friendship to be reciprocal, more likely one party will be academically stronger, and persisting in such an unequal relationship requires moral strength and self-respect from the weaker party (note that this remark assumes that one party is stronger than the other across the board). One participant observed that reciprocal academic relationships help to develop the independence required at higher levels (meaning year 13 and university). A one-sided academic friendship would foster dependency. Indeed, one participant said that academic friendship has to be reciprocal to be a *friendship*—otherwise it is a teacher/student relationship. Then, the student won't feel able to challenge the teacher, so the debating activity would get lost.

In addition to maturity, discipline, focus and a will to learn, the participants identified patience as a cardinal virtue in academic friends, followed by kindness, efficiency, reliability and communication skills. In contrast with the remark about the value of reciprocity, one participant suggested that a good academic friend should be 'someone a bit better at the subject than you'. Another suggestion was that academic friends should have contrasting opinions, though this was quickly qualified by the thought that this is unlikely because friends tend to be of a like mind.

When invited to think about *critical* friendship, the participants for the most part reiterated their remarks about academic friendship, but with greater emphasis on the trust that arises from a friendship that is not only about mutual criticism. Indeed, one participant was very clear that, 'There had better be more to the relationship than criticism'. Critical friends should have some fun stuff in common; there should be a means of de-stressing within the relationship. This, they thought, would most likely arise if the friendship precedes the criticism. Similarly, a well established friendship helps communication. It's easier, less hurtful if the critic knows you, and shared humour makes the criticism easier to take. At any rate the critic must not 'act superior', or even constructive criticism might be badly taken. A potentially good academic friend is someone who already knows your faults and doesn't think less of you on account of them.

When thinking about the tension between friendship and criticism (the theme of the work already cited by Achinstein and Meyer), the participants noted a natural reluctance to hurt a friend's feelings. However, some insisted that real friendship requires warts-and-all knowledge and criticism. One

went so far as to say that, 'A real friend is more critical than a [merely] academic friend.' The questions focussed on the qualities required of the critic, but participants noted that critical friendship requires 'maturity' (possibly the most often-used word in the discussions) from the person criticised.

Both groups raised the possibility that the critic may end up learning from the friend criticised. Participants noted that academic friendship may require both parties to swallow their pride so that disagreements don't damage the friendship. The critic must be able to distinguish a difference in views from an objective error or fault (professional academics know that this is a tall order that not all reviewers of papers and books manage to deliver).

The participants identified several features that suggest a role for educational institutions in mitigating the tension between criticism and friendship. They pointed out that while a friend may find gentle ways of putting critical points, someone who has been given the role of critic is 'just doing their job' so there is less danger of criticism hurting. This distancing effect can be enhanced with explicit marking guidelines (so that the criteria of criticism are part of the task, not personal to the critic) and clarity that the work is being criticised, not the author. In other words, both parties should understand that criticism is primarily an encounter between work and criteria, not between critic and victim. Critics should find something to praise and understand that everything starts less-than-perfect. Taken together, these points explain why students were more comfortable receiving criticism from teachers. One participant observed that it is a teacher's job to criticise, but it's not obviously part of a friend's role, so someone could be offended by criticism from a friend.

When asked about flattery, participants replied that 'there's a time and a place for flattery', and some suggested that mutual flattery can be an enjoyable activity. There was some disagreement as to whether flattery involved praising without meaning it (deception) or could mean sincerely complimenting. None identified the flattery of omission, of failing to point out faults, nor was there any awareness of the place that selectively positive feedback might have in building up a student's confidence. When pressed on the choice between warts-and-all frankness and flattery, some participants finessed the point by insisting on the importance of timing in truth-telling.

When invited to discuss cheating, one participant said that there is a definite line between giving someone your work and generally coaching them. Helping without cheating includes: coaching in method and technique; going over background information; providing signposting phrases; explaining what sort of answers exam boards look for; pointing out flaws in essays; suggesting ideas; mentioning the key points and supplying an answer to a different question. One participant said that you need to be taught in such a way that you develop your own style and original ideas. (This is a useful reminder that the best protection against plagiarism is intellectual independence. Students who patch together essays out of found materials sometimes fall into plagiarism when they forget to record where they found some snippet; students who create their own arguments do not run this risk.)

When asked about forming and maintaining academic friendships, participants returned to the theme of trust. Character flaws and weaknesses should be tolerated and not broadcast to others: 'it comes back to trust'. On the other hand, the participants were much more positive about competition than Klein and other educationalists reviewed in section I. There was a sense that friendly rivalry is always healthy. 'Friendly' means not 'rubbing it in the other person's face' and must not be essential to the relationship. That is, the friendship could continue if the rivalry were suspended. Some

participants were frank about the motivational power of their desire to beat the person who is top. Others talked about academic friendship as a means to explore extra-curricular curiosity.

Facebook and the internet were considered to be distractions. However, e-mail conversations are more likely to stay focussed than face-to-face conversations with mates. Here as before, some participants sheepishly acknowledged a tendency to muck about in time intended for study. Moreover, participants valued the ease and discretion of electronic communication. Internet conversations can be easily terminated, require little commitment and need not be visible to the whole peer group. It is easy to prevent the relationship from becoming more intimate than intended. Facebook friending involves no commitment (unlike an exchange of phone numbers or e-mail addresses) and messaging is invisible to all but the sender and recipient. No-one said so, but the thought seemed to be that you can chat with someone online without being seen to do so by your friendship group. Internet chat can be worked in with other activities, and therefore does not require the same commitment as going to the library with someone. One observed, of Facebook, 'You can post a question on your status... and if someone gives you something that is complete rubbish, you can disregard it without hurting their feelings at all.' One participant said that you have to be more of an individual learner to learn things over the internet (i.e. someone who doesn't have to be shown).

When asked how they thought things will be different at university, the participants confirmed our hypotheses about their expectations. They expressed worries about plagiarism, and knew that there would be less contact time than at school and VI-form college. Nevertheless, some were surprised that contact hours at university in the Humanities can be as little as eight hours per week or less ('Isn't that, like, nothing?').

Participants thought that there is more point to academic friendships and social networking at university because school exams are relatively prescriptive, whereas university involves extra research and need for debate. As one put it, 'You have to use your own head.' There was a sense that university study is a different 'animal' from anything the participants had directly experienced thus far. Rather touchingly, there was an expectation that academic friendships will be easier to form at university because students at that level are more mature (that word again) and have a desire to learn. (Our prior research into the experiences of philosophy undergraduates included some quite bitter expressions of disappointment that the thirst for learning was not as intense in the undergraduate body as had been expected (Larvor & Lippitt 2009).) At the same time, some participants felt that university would be more competitive than school because it is the last stage before the jobs market. Participants saw value in peer friendships as sources of support—they will all be new to the experience and thus in the same boat—and discipline ('You have to be more honest with your friends at uni because there are no parents to keep them in line.')

### **III: Philosophers on Friendship**

How do these naturally-occurring thoughts connect with some of those found amongst philosophers, ancient and modern, who have written on friendship? Is there anything in this literature that could be used to encourage new undergraduates/school leavers to think about how best to form beneficial intellectual friendships?

To begin with, there seemed to be little in the students' default understanding of friendship that echoed the idea, found in Aristotle and Cicero amongst others, that true friendship is possible only amongst 'good men': those in possession of the necessary virtues.<sup>7</sup> Friends, for these students, are first of all those with whom you hang out and muck about. Or as Aristotle put it: '...the friendship of young people seems to aim at pleasure; for they live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them...' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a31-33). However, once the discussion got going, the importance of the academic friend possessing certain values and virtues came increasingly to the surface. One of the most frequently recurring virtue-words was 'maturity', by which they meant, among other things, the capacity to set aside immediate pleasures and settle to some work. In other words, Aristotle was right about young people, but he failed to do justice to their recognition of this tendency in themselves, and their efforts to overcome it. (The participants also used 'maturity' to refer to emotional continence in the face of criticism.)

One of the questions that came up in the focus groups concerns frankness. This is a central theme in the philosophy of friendship from Plato's *Lysis* onwards: the importance of honesty, and the related idea that flattery is the very opposite of true friendship. 'Without honesty', Cicero claims, 'friendship has no meaning' (Cicero xxv.92). To be sure, on the relationship between friendship and flattery, one encounters different views. William Hazlitt describes friendship as 'a flattering mirror' in which we see 'our virtues magnified and our errors softened' (Hazlitt 1991: 153). On the subject of flattery, the participants in the focus groups talked about the role friends have boosting each other's confidence, especially in the face of criticism that magnifies errors and downplays virtues. Here, your friend is the person who nurses your wounded pride when your work has taken a critical battering.

Hazlitt's remark captures a truth about friendship, but many (perhaps most) philosophers take a more strenuous view of the matter. They insist that, recognisable though mutual admiration societies may be, the kind of 'flattering mirror' Hazlitt describes is not true friendship at all. Writers in antiquity, Cicero and Plutarch, discuss in detail the problem of how to distinguish a flatterer from a true friend, and in the early Christian era, when there is considerable discussion of especially Cicero's view of friendship, St Basil the Great and St Jerome make much of his idea that flattery destroys friendship and that true friendship thus *demands* a degree of frankness.<sup>8</sup> Basil insists that: 'the flatterer speaks to give pleasure while the friend refrains from nothing, even that which causes pain' (Basil of Caesarea 1972: ep. 20, cited in White 1992: 74). This echoes Cicero's claim that 'flattery is far sorrier [than frankness], for by failing to call wrongdoing to account, it lets a friend fall to his ruin ... It is an essential part of true friendship ... to offer and receive admonition; but it must be offered courteously, not peremptorily, and received with forbearance, not with resentment. By the same sign, we must maintain that there is no danger more deadly to friendship than servility, sycophancy, flattery...' (Cicero, *ibid.*, xxiv.89-xxv.91). It is this 'failing to call wrongdoing to account' that most interests us here. The focus on safety referred to in much of the literature reviewed in section I tends to overlook the fact that to reduce anxiety to zero would require backing off from making incisive (that is to say, cutting) criticism. This is a kind of flattery: what in section II we have called the flattery of

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<sup>7</sup> 'Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue...' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1156b7-8)

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch's treatise is entitled 'How to discriminate a flatterer from a friend'. On Plutarch, see Konstan 1997: 98-105; on Plutarch, Basil and Jerome, see White 1992: 39, 74, 81 and 140.

omissionsilence. It is not overt buttering-up, but this failure to mention faults would be, in the context of academic friendship, a failure of such friendship.

Cicero is a major influence on the humanist writers of the Renaissance, and among them Francis Bacon (in his essay on friendship) describes 'faithful counsel' from a friend as one of the key 'fruits' of friendship. Approvingly quoting Heraclitus' saying that 'dry light is ever the best', he asserts that 'certain it is, that the light, that a man receiveth, by counsel from another, is drier, and purer, than that which cometh from his own understanding, and judgement; which is ever infused and drenched in his affections and customs.' (Bacon in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 205). In other words, the honest friend brings something that one simply cannot provide oneself. However, in the group discussions, the participants insisted that there must be more to a critical friendship than criticism. There should be mutual affection and shared humour, recreation and values. This suggests that, to use Bacon's metaphor, 'faithful counsel' is a *fruit* of friendship; it is not the whole tree. Moreover, as the participants noted, the commonalities that constitute the friendship also make it less likely that the academic friend will offer alternative points of view. This youthful kind of friendship, with its origins in pleasure and play, is likely to hold between friends who are 'infused and drenched' in the same 'affections and customs' as each other and therefore not as drily challenging as Bacon might have hoped. In any case, one of the 'affections' in which a pair of friends might be 'drenched' could be a passion for a particular intellectual pursuit. As noted, some of the group discussion participants identified shared extra-curricular curiosities as grounds for the sort of friendship that might become an academic or critical friendship.

A friendship might originate in a shared interest without demanding shared opinions. C.S. Lewis claims that, 'The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.' (Lewis 1960: 66). Compare this with Ladyshevsky's assumption (quoted in section I) that the route out of *aporia* (that is, the criticism-induced disequilibrium he described) must be towards a solution acceptable to both discussants. However, where friends do hold differing opinions, or hold the same opinions with differing intensities, it may not be easy or even possible to explore these differences. As Nietzsche observed, '...human relationships rest on the fact that a certain few things are never said, indeed that they are never touched upon; and once these pebbles are set rolling, the friendship follows after, and falls apart.' (Nietzsche 1984: 193 (§376)). Students are aware of this danger; their reluctance to criticise each other's work is not merely the expression of a preference for safety and ease. Nietzsche's solution is to remember that our opinions and those of our friends are not simple products of reason. Rather, they are the necessary consequences of 'the indissoluble interweaving of character, occupation, talent and environment.' (*ibid.*). Reflection on this thought ought to make us less inclined to claim truth for ourselves and impute error to those who disagree with us. In this perspective, differing opinions become evidence of differences in 'character, occupation, talent and environment'. This way of looking at differences offers the possibility of mentioning the unmentionable, of handling and hefting the pebbles which, if allowed to roll free, would threaten the friendship. Friends with a deep appreciation of Nietzsche's point may be able to treat their differing convictions as hypotheses of equal standing. A feeling for the dependency of one's opinions on the contingencies of one's life may come only with experience, that is, with noticing changes in one's opinions consequent on changes in occupation or environment. Nietzsche's observation suggests that the psychological conditions necessary for Cicero's courteous exchange of criticism are complex. The soldierly Roman virtue of forbearance under critical fire will not suffice. Rather, we must come to regard our nature as '...a



changing sphere of opinions and moods, thus learning to despise it a bit...' (*ibid.*). This insight into the processes that form and reform our opinions may not be readily available to the young—it may be part of the 'maturity' at which our focus groups kept gesturing. It can be manufactured, sometimes, by presenting students with philosophical intuition-pumps that drag their opinions first this way then that. Some students do learn through such exercises to despise their own opinionated natures a bit; others learn to despise philosophy.

A second and related theme is the importance of trust. Here is Cicero again: 'the foundation of that steadfastness and loyalty for which we are looking in friendship is trust, for nothing endures that cannot be trusted' (Cicero xxviii.65). Several of the students' comments showed their tacit agreement with this claim. Trust was one of the reasons why some students thought that academic friendships could best (or only?) arise from a pre-existing friendship. Perhaps this echoes Emerson's thought that 'A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud.' (Emerson in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 225). This 'thinking aloud' is clearly an important part of the mutual working through a problem central to academic friendship. Why would one not wish to think aloud before a stranger? The obvious possibility is that our thoughts are unfinished and we do not wish to commit to them publicly. They may have logical faults we have yet to detect. There are other dangers: our thoughts may violate a taboo, or be open to misinterpretation, or expose us to physical danger. The participants' comments on trust indicate three objects for it: work, feelings and reputation. If I show you a draft of my work and ask for your critical opinion, I trust you not to steal my ideas, I trust you not to ridicule them to my face, and I trust you not to disparage them behind my back or publish them without my permission.

The first of these was clearly present in the minds of students who worried about having their ideas stolen, even though such theft could not affect their own academic progress. The second of these three kinds of trust goes beyond refraining from overt ridicule of the work and its author. For the participants, it is part of trust that the more skilled or knowledgeable critical friend should not be patronising, should not 'act superior'. This again echoes one of Cicero's claims: 'the most important thing in friendship is the preservation of a right attitude towards our inferiors. So many times there are among us men of extraordinary distinction, such as Scipio was ... in our little group. Yet he never set himself above ... those of his friends who were of inferior station.' (Cicero xix.69). The third worry, about risk to reputation, was especially acute for the participants in our groups because they saw going to another student for help as a remedial action, and therefore evidence of academic weakness or falling behind in the course.

This connects with the final big theme, reciprocity. This cropped up in the literature reviewed in section I, and emerged in the student discussion too, though only once the discussion shifted from peer teaching to peer coaching. The connection the students made between reciprocity and intellectual independence interests us greatly. Several philosophers of friendship make much of the theme of reciprocity in friendship: consider, for instance, Aristotle's pessimism about the prospects for lasting friendships between unequals (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1158b29-1159a13). The difficulty of friendships between unequals is the reason, Aristotle writes, why there is a question whether friends really do wish for friends the greatest goods. If my friend gains 'the greatest goods' to the point where his stock far surpasses mine, it may not be possible for us to remain friends. Education aims at increasing students' store of knowledge, skill, virtue and wisdom. Since different students gain these goods at

different rates, it is not to be expected that a pair of academic friends will remain academic equals indefinitely, even if they begin as equals.

In the student discussion, reciprocity seemed to take numerous forms. First, the mutual respect that friendship implies. As noted, some students introduced the interesting idea, absent from Aristotle's account, that the good friend is someone who already knows your faults and doesn't think less of you on account of them. Second, the idea of being companions in pursuit of a common project. The student discussion moved from the assumption that the person capable of helping with you with your work would be someone more knowledgeable or skilful than you to the idea that 'it doesn't have to be someone cleverer, you could be working things out together.' This centrality of focus on a common goal recalls C.S. Lewis's contrast between erotic love and friendship in *The Four Loves*: 'Lovers are always talking together about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.' (Lewis 1960: 61).

## **Discussion: what can educational institutions do?**

A meta-theme of our investigation was maximising the intellectual benefit of critical friendship while minimising the emotional costs. In the literature reviewed in section I, we noted that various writers talk about ensuring a feeling of safety, *etc.*, and Klein condemns competition as an inhibitor. But we would claim that you are not in fact safe if the criticism is real. Your work is in danger of failing to meet the required standard and you are in danger of falling into *aporia*. So, while confidence-building is important, and the tone and manner of criticism (and reaction to it) have to be policed, we should expect a sense of danger to remain so long as the criticism remains rigorous. The students in the focus groups knew this, which is why they returned repeatedly to the trust between friends. Trust is necessary because and insofar as something is at stake and could be lost. This is most obvious in dangerous activities such as diving and rock-climbing, where trust between companions is essential, both of their characters and competence.

When students are invited to criticise each other's work, they often do so very tentatively and make only the most anodyne suggestions. This reluctance to wield the red pen arises, we claim, from a combination of awareness that feelings and reputations are at stake, and nervousness about their competence as critics. (Imagine going on a diving course and being invited to check someone else's breathing apparatus before you have learned how it works.) The students in the focus groups said that explicit marking criteria make it easier to evaluate their own work and that of others. The successful mentoring and peer-support schemes reviewed in section I all include some training. It follows that if we wish students to participate in a version of the culture of mutual criticism in which professional academics work, we should offer them some guidance in the arts of editing, criticising and reviewing. Few philosophers if any are ever trained to referee journal articles or review books; most of us pick it up as we go along. This, though, not how most professions maintain standards. Usually, when people are given new roles and responsibilities, they get some training in how to fulfil these. Suppose one were to design a training course for journal referees. What would be its content? What exercises would foster the required virtues and sensibility?

Such a training course should include some discussion of the virtues of a critical friend, such as we have begun here. These virtues have application whenever one person criticises the work of another,

whether they are friends or not. There is no reason why anonymous referee reports on papers submitted to academic journals should not be friendly. This imagined training course would include reflection on the distinction between disagreement and incompetence. There can be a competent presentation of an argument that the critic disagrees with, especially in philosophy, where arguments aim at plausibility and phenomenological recognition rather than empirical or mathematical validity. Few would deny this in principle, but the problem of distinguishing disagreement from incompetence in practice could bear further discussion.

The aim of an intervention such as this would be to help students achieve the double-distancing mentioned above. Double-distancing is valuable even between friends. Perhaps your friend can put things in a way you'll understand and can beware of your red buttons. Perhaps you already trust each other and forgive each other's faults, and have ways peculiar to your friendship of de-stressing and recovering from conflict. Nevertheless, critical friendship requires competence as well as character. A training in criticism of this sort must be part of the mainstream development of academic skills. One of the barriers to the development of critical friendships is the perception among students that asking for help is exceptional and remedial. This is, regrettably, corroborated by the tendency of institutions to introduce peer-support programmes in response to difficulties experienced by specific student groups, such as international students, students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and others who are judged to be at risk of dropping out. Training in how to help peers, framed as induction into research practice, might go some way to embed the idea that mutual assistance is a normal part of academic life, even for the most senior academics.

Another assumption that the focus group participants shared with many of the programmes reviewed in section I is that the proper sources of help for students are staff and more advanced students. The students referred spontaneously to students in the years above; many of the 'peer' programmes we surveyed are in fact programmes in which advanced students mentor beginners. This reflects a deeper assumption that the help must be in the form of teaching rather than critique. As we have seen (principally in the focus group results), there is a close connection between genuine peer-support (that is, between academic near-equals) and the development of intellectual independence.

As noted in section I, Handal defines 'good criticism' as 'generally relevant, argumentative, well-documented and something we learn from' (Handal, 2008). Training in criticism should offer a process in which criticism is written down. Writing requires the critic to think a little harder about the criticism. It makes criticism more effective and more open to challenge. It is not uncommon for journals to supply questions or outline headings to referees. Some suitably modified example could serve as a useful tool for students learning to criticise the work of others.

For us, one of the most valuable outcomes of the focus groups was to be reminded of the significance of peer-groups. Among students, your friendship-group fixes your place in (school or university) society and is thus expressive and to some degree constitutive of who you are. Finding an academic friend with all the properties we have been discussing may require violation of these structures. We see this at university: students of a sort flock together, even when doing so is clearly against their academic interests. In cases of collusion, it is almost always weak students colluding with other weak students. This point about social structure emerged in various ways, most obviously but not uniquely in the discussion of Facebook. The students seemed to be telling us that the discretion and lack of commitment of Facebook allow them to get around the constraints imposed by their social structures.

No-one need know that you are messaging a nerd, and anyway it's not proper friendship it's only Facebook. The question for institutions, then, is how can we design buildings, virtual environments and activities that offer the possibility of discreet and non-committal peer-support?

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